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AUTHOR Duranti, Alessandro; Ochs, Elinor
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ABSTRACT

This report introduces the concept of syncretic literacy by examining an exchange in which a 6-year-old Samoan-American boy, in his urban Los Angeles (California) home, involves members of his extended family to complete homework. The study illustrates how English is sometimes used in ways that are consistent with the socialization practices typical of traditional learning environments in the home country and how different family members adopt distinct cultural strategies in their interaction with the boy within the same activity. Traditional Samoan-American learning environments are described, especially in syncretic literacy instruction settings, and the text includes photographs from the videotaped home environment. Findings contradict two common misconceptions of multiculturalism: that language is a precise indicator of cultural orientation, and that members of multicultural communities are in one culture at a time. In this home environment, syncretic literacy accounts for the ways in which a language is used for distinct cultural practices and the ways in which different cultural practices are merged within the same literacy activity. (Contains 48 references.) (NAV)

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SYNCRETIC LITERACY: MULTICULTURALISM IN SAMOAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

ALESSANDRO DURANTI AND ELINOR OCHS

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Syncretic Literacy:

Multiculturalism in Samoan American Families

ALESSANDRO DURANTI AND ELINOR OCHS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

NATIONAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND
SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Barry McLaughlin and Roland Tharp, Co-Directors
National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity
and Second Language Learning
Social Sciences II
1156 High Street
University of California
Santa Cruz, CA 95064

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The transcripts, translations, and interpretations of the interactions discussed here were made in collaboration with Elia K. Ta`asê, a member of the Samoan American community in this study. Other members of our research team who have also contributed to the discussion of the themes and issues discussed here include Jennifer Reynolds, James Soli`ai, and Edgar Ta`asê.

Syncretic Literacy:

Multiculturalism in Samoan American Families

Abstract

On the basis of research on the Samoan American community of urban Los Angeles, the authors argue against two common misconceptions of multiculturalism:

(1) that language is a precise indicator of cultural orientation; and

(2) that members of multicultural communities are in one culture at a time.

The notion of syncretic literacy is introduced to account for the ways in which the same language (in this case, Samoan or English) can be used for distinct cultural practices and the ways in which different cultural practices can be merged within the same literacy activity.

This report examines an exchange in which a six-year-old Samoan American boy involves members of his extended family in completing his homework. We see that English is sometimes used in ways that are consistent with the socialization practices typical of traditional learning environments in the home country and that different family members adopt distinct cultural strategies in their interaction with the boy within the same activity.

MULTICULTURALISM

In this report, we examine the multicultural organization of literacy instruction within the Samoan American community of urban Los Angeles. In particular, we introduce the concept of *syncretic literacy* as a framework for analyzing how diverse cultural practices inform the organization of literacy activities of this and other ethnic communities.

Multiculturalism is a pervasive social reality whose complexities have boggled the minds of social scientists and educators for decades. In characterizing and disentangling the diverse cultural threads that compose heterogeneous communities, three common misconceptions of multiculturalism persist: (1) Language is a precise indicator of cultural orientation; (2) members of multicultural communities are in one culture at a time; and (3) each culture is homogeneous and uncontaminated. Before discussing syncretic literacy, we will examine the first two of these misconceptions. The third is examined in Duranti and Ochs (in press).

Misconception #1: Language Is a Precise Indicator of Cultural Orientation

Multiculturalism is commonly identified with multilingualism. It is entirely intuitive to link language and cultural orientation. After all, as we acquire linguistic competence, we are at the same time being socialized into cultural competence, a process we call *language socialization* (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984, 1995; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Language is the most important semiotic tool for representing, transmitting, and creating social order and cultural world views. Furthermore, in linguistically heterogeneous communities, choice of a particular language is often intimately tied to a desire on the part of interlocutors to instantiate for that particular interactional moment a set of sociocultural relationships, institutions, activities, topics, concepts, ideologies, expectations, and values (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gal, 1987; Hill & Hill, 1986; Kroskrity, 1993; Macpherson, 1991). In these cases, code-switching is an analog of culture-switching. In other cases, however, cultural orientation may not correspond to code orientation. As will be demonstrated in the present study, multiculturalism may in fact pervade the use of what appears as a single code. In the Samoan American community, for example, one may use English in a distinctly Samoan manner or Samoan in a manner appropriate to mainstream American interactions. Although language is an important symbol and tool of culture, the researcher cannot count on language as a privileged key to how cultures interface in the literacy activities of a person or of a community. We need to revise currently dominant notions of language as code and see it instead as a set of practices, including specific ways of speaking and of interpreting the world (words included), and as a means of interacting with human, symbolic, and material resources available in the environment.

Misconception # 2: Members of Multicultural Communities Are in One Culture at a Time

A second misleading tendency in analyzing multiculturalism is to assume that members of multicultural communities shift from one cultural orientation to another in the course of conducting their daily social lives. As noted earlier, in this view, just as one switches between codes, so one switches between systems of social values, beliefs, emotions, practices, identities, and institutions. Although it may be useful to treat cultures as coherent and separate, and although in some cases members of multicultural communities do draw boundaries between what they consider traditional and what they consider new, more typically, cultural threads from diverse sources are interwoven into a single interactional fabric. In the Samoan American community, members tend not to culture-switch abruptly as they move from one activity to the next or one setting to the next; rather, they blend cultural orientations in the course of carrying out a single activity, including the activities of reading and writing Samoan and English.

Our research in this area is consistent with recent studies of immigrants in the United States that stress the importance of seeing these groups as operating simultaneously in two communities (Chavez, 1994; Rosaldo, 1989; Zentella, 1990). Our work, however, differs from these studies in our emphasis on the need to study the daily, moment-by-moment confluence of multiple cultural models and

language-mediated practices. We believe that multiculturalism as a sense of belonging to more than one community is not only imagined as an ideology of connections (Chavez, 1994); it is also enacted in daily routines that need to be unpacked if we want to uncover the different cultural threads they both imply and sustain. A substantial part of this paper is dedicated to the discussion of some of these routines and threads in one Samoan American family.

SYNCRETIC LITERACY

In counterpoint to these misconceptions of multiculturalism, we propose considering literacy activities in all communities as syncretic. By syncretic literacy we mean that an intermingling or merging of culturally diverse traditions informs and organizes literacy activities. This use of syncretism is drawn from a number of sources, including studies of the interaction of religions in contact situations (Apter, 1991; Herskovits, 1937, 1952, 1966), Bakhtin's work on heteroglossia and hybridization (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984; Vološinov, 1973), and contemporary studies of multilingual communities and postcolonial discourse (Hanks, 1986, 1987; Hill & Hill, 1986; Kulick, 1992).

For us, syncretic literacy is not necessarily restricted to a blending of historically diverse literacy traditions; rather, syncretism here may include incorporation of any culturally diverse values, beliefs, emotions, practices, identities, institutions, tools, and other material resources into the organization of literacy activities. The main idea behind this notion is the belief that, when different cultural systems meet, one rarely simply replaces the other. This means that, as pointed out by Hanks (1986, 1987) for the Maya, as soon as contact takes place, any preexisting indigenous tradition is bound to be affected by the new tradition proposed (or imposed) by the newcomers. At the same time, it is counterproductive to conclude that the blending is such that one cannot trace the influences of different traditions or the culture-specific strategies used by participants. Hanks's analysis, for instance, makes ample use of two distinct traditions in order to describe their blending in the Maya discourse of the last four centuries. We follow a similar path by differentiating between modes of interaction in the bilingual situation that resemble those found in most adult-child interactions in Western Samoan households and those that are found in school settings and literacy activities in both the United States and Western Samoa.

The term *syncretic* has been used by Hill and Hill (1986) to characterize the hybridization of codes used by the Mexicano speakers who rely on Nahuatl and Spanish. We wish to extend syncretism to include hybrid cultural constructions of speech acts and speech activities that constitute literacy. In our case, the availability of an audiovisual record of the interactions we are studying allows us to widen the concept of syncretism (as well as the concepts of hybridization and heteroglossia). Rather than focusing on a code- or text-centered notion of syncretism, we analyze the merging of different activities, acts within the same activity, and tools that originated in and are indexically related to different cultural traditions.

In our view, the syncretic nature of literacy activities is due to a number of factors, which include (a) the need to use tools that originally were not specifically designed for literacy activities, (b) the need to connect different cultural traditions and expectations, and (c) the ability to coordinate among competing simultaneous activities.

The simultaneous occurrence of multiple, sometimes competing activities has often been commented on by researchers studying literacy events in the home environment (Anderson, 1984; Leichter, 1984; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984). These studies, among others (Heath, 1983; Lave, 1988; Scribner & Cole, 1981), emphasize the importance of shifting the almost exclusive focus on writing (or print) as a generalized technology characteristic of earlier studies of literacy (Goody, 1977; Goody & Watt, 1968) to an appreciation of the importance of specific activities organized around and through print. In this report, we continue in this tradition by integrating the emphasis on activities with an ethnographically informed attention to the physical environments in which literacy activities take place and the tools and artifacts that are made available in such environments. When we look at literacy practices

outside the school environment, we find that the material resources utilized for literacy tasks have a crucial role in establishing the breadth as well as the limits of what literacy can do or mean for the children engaging in it. To be able to participate successfully in literacy activities, children must learn to utilize resources that were not originally designed for literacy practices. Even in those cases in which the materials used were originally conceived as literacy tools, the context in which they are used forces a new interpretation of their original meaning. Placed in a new context, old tools not only bring in remnants of the past but also force participants to face issues of tradition, change, and social identity.

FIELD RESEARCH

Since 1993, we have been video recording Samoan American children and adults interacting in a variety of settings, including four households and a church compound in the greater Los Angeles area. The present study of children's literacy activities is part of a more comprehensive study (in preparation) of how Samoan American families educate their children into problem-solving discourse activities.

FEATURES OF TRADITIONAL SAMOAN LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Before introducing the syncretic literacy activities we have been documenting in Los Angeles, we provide a rough outline of the basic features of what we call *traditional Samoan learning environments*.

We are aware of the fact that the label traditional, in this context, is potentially misleading, especially in light of our own stance against rigidly placing interactions into one category or another. Ultimately, categorical differences are given by differences in degree, as well as by the ideology framing the choices available to social actors. We are, however, confident that there exist interactional, symbolic, and material features of the children's learning environment that

(a) are more closely associated by the participants themselves with the home country and a traditional way of life (often lexicalized as the *fa`aSâmoa*, or Samoan way, in opposition to the *fa`apâlaŋi*, or western way);
(b) characterize informal household interactions involving children in Western Samoa (as described in some detail by Ochs, 1988); and
(c) are analytically distinguishable from patterns of interaction found in school-based literacy practices in Samoa and in the United States (see discussion to follow).

The historical, psychological, and interactional reality of a distinct Samoan way is necessary to entertain the very idea of syncretic literacy and to discuss those features ascribable to one or the other culture or to both. It is important, therefore, to realize that, in proposing our notion of syncretic literacy, we are not arguing in favor of fuzzy notions of culture and language, but in favor of a more fluid analytical understanding of the ways in which specific elements originating in different sociohistorical contexts come together in the daily life of a Samoan American child and (more generally) of any multicultural child in the United States (see also Duranti, Ochs, & Ta`ase, in press).

In our observations of traditional Samoan learning environments, we have found the following four principles to be at work: (1) Caregiving is hierarchical and distributed; (2) children are expected to accommodate to the situation; (3) socialization occurs through repeated demonstration, prompting, and action imperatives; and (4) there is an emphasis on task completion.

Caregiving Is Hierarchical and Distributed

The organization of caregiving is closely related to the political organization of the village. In particular, the stratified nature of Samoan society, where people are distinguished in terms of status (titled vs. untitled) and rank (high chief vs. orator), is reflected at the household level in the hierarchical organization of caregiving (Ochs 1982, 1988). The basic principle here is that, given two potential caregivers, the more senior or higher ranking one will

expect the younger and lower ranking one to be the active caregiver. This is realized either through other-selection—the higher caregiver directs the lower caregiver to carry out a task on behalf of the child—or self-selection—the lower ranking caregiver carries out the task without being so instructed. Thus, for example, the practical care of even young infants—rocking the infant to sleep, picking her up upon awakening, changing her clothes and bringing her to be breastfed, or, in the case of older infants, feeding the child whole foods—tends to be the responsibility of older siblings of the child or perhaps a younger sibling of one of the parents, if these persons are not at school or called for other chores. If no one younger is present, the child's mother or other adult takes charge of the child's care. Even when the child is cared for by her siblings, an adult is usually within relatively close proximity and intermittently monitors the caregiving activity. In this sense, caregiving is not only hierarchically organized, but also socially distributed. For example, caregiving is distributed when a sibling carries a hungry infant to her mother and the mother breastfeeds the child. Similarly, when an adult directs a sibling on how to carry or wash the infant, the task is collectively accomplished.

Child Expected to Accommodate to Situation

In Samoan households and communities, there is an expectation that a child will accommodate to the situation rather than that other people present will change their goals or activities to accommodate to the child. We refer to the first set of socialization practices as *situation-centered* and the latter as *child-centered* (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984).

In rural Western Samoan villages, children are socialized to attend to what is taking place and to who is present in a variety of ways. For Samoans, the most important quality a child must display is *fa`aaloalo*, meaning *respect*. The term includes *alo*, meaning *(to) face (in the direction of)*. From infancy, children are held or placed facing outward, paralleling the orientation of the caregiver toward some interaction at hand. For instance, often a baby is fed facing outward, so that he can look at the rest of the interaction in the house. Young children are expected to position themselves at the edge of dwellings to observe and ultimately report on what is taking place outside. Toddlers are explicitly socialized to identify and call out names of family and community members as they pass by.

Socialization Through Repeated Demonstration, Prompting, and Action Imperatives

In every community, members interact with children and other novices in ways that allow them to appropriate cultural knowledge, beliefs, stances, expectations, preferences, and practices (Rogoff, 1990). By and large, members of every community rely on a similar core of strategies for facilitating the appropriation of these cultural orientations. However, communities differ in their reliance on one or another socializing strategy. That is, they differ in terms of strategies they usually employ and in terms of the activity settings in which they opt for one or another strategy. In traditional Samoan households, three socializing strategies prevail: repeated demonstration of an activity, prompting, and action imperatives.

Generally, Samoan children are allowed a prolonged period of observation of repeated demonstrations of actions and activities before being expected to assume a central role in them. For example, young children are not pressured into talking before they articulate words and show themselves to be interested in communication. Children are given ample opportunities to observe a wide variety of culturally relevant activities. They accompany older siblings, parents, and grandparents in work and, to some extent, in formal school environments. As siblings and adults weave mats, carve boats, braid string, shuck coconuts, cook, do laundry, read the Bible, and deliberate political matters, toddlers are close at hand. Often a sibling will be carrying out some other work activity as he watches over a younger brother or sister. The toddler may stand close by, attending to the activity at hand.

Children and adolescents spend a long period of time as overhearers of ceremonial speeches. Only much later in life are they expected to display their own oratorical skills. Similarly, children spend long periods of time as audience to dance performers. They practice dance routines over and over again before they are themselves public performers. In

these ways, by the time they are asked to participate more centrally in an activity, children have usually had many occasions to witness its completion.

Similar to the strategy of repeated demonstration is the socializing practice of prompting. Prompting involves the novice reproducing or attempting to reproduce an act or activity. Prompting is a socializing interaction in which a (usually) more knowledgeable interlocutor elicits the repetition of an action or activity by a (usually) less knowledgeable interlocutor. Although prompting is universal, some societies, such as rural Western Samoan communities, rely heavily on this practice as a form of instruction (see also Demuth, 1986; Miller, 1986; Schieffelin, 1990; and Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, 1986).

In Samoan, prompting what to say is usually keyed by prefacing the utterance to be repeated with the verb *fai,* meaning *say* (and also *do*). Prompting may also be keyed prosodically through varying amplitude and raising pitch height. Prompting is common both at home and in formal school environments. At home, prompting is a means of involving young children as participants in multiparty interactions. More particularly, prompting offers a model of age- (and status-) appropriate behavior for children to reproduce. For example, a sibling or adult may prompt a child to tell a third party a piece of news or a directive on behalf of the sibling or adult. In these cases, the child is being socialized through prompting to act as messenger, a role expected of younger untitled persons. In delivering messages, the child serves the author of the message. Much like an orator in relation to the high chief the orator represents, the child represents the older family member and thereby manifests the high status of that member.

A third related socialization strategy is to direct explicitly the actions of the child or novice through the use of imperatives. Action imperatives lace the interactions of family members. As in all communities, children are ordered to assume age- and gender-appropriate demeanors (e.g., *faitai `ou vae!* meaning *cross your legs!)* or to carry out particular tasks (e.g., *`aumai se vai a le tama!* meaning *bring some water for the boy!*). Commonly, a toddler will be ordered to carry out what Lave & Wenger (1991) call a *peripheral* task within the larger work effort taking place. For example, a mother sweeping the household compound will give a basket to her two-year-old and order her to pick up fallen leaves on the compound or to rearrange mats in a dwelling. In our observations, generally children are not ordered to carry out tasks that they cannot easily carry out by themselves.

Emphasis on Task Completion

As noted earlier, in Western Samoan rural communities, children spend considerable time in close proximity to work activities carried out by others, and, in some cases, they themselves participate in these activities. As observers and as participants, they are expected to be mindful of and contribute to the accomplishment of these activities (Duranti & Ochs, 1986). This expectation is part of the situation-centered focus of socialization in Samoan households.

When a household activity in which a child participates is completed, family members tend not to focus on the child to praise or blame him or her. Rather than emphasizing the child's individual contribution, members of Western Samoan households tend to focus either on the fact that the task has been correctly performed or on the task as a collective and collaborative accomplishment.

Linguistically, this is realized in two prevalent forms of assessment. First, those monitoring the task may produce an assessment of the action or activity performed rather than of the performer. These impersonal assessments point out the appropriateness, correctness, or completion of something rather than the specific quality of the child's contribution. Thus, frequently heard expressions such as *fa`apeŋâ,!* meaning *like that!* (often abbreviated as *ŋâ!),* predicate a quality of an impersonal referent, namely the action or activity. However, individual-oriented laudatory expressions such as *very good!* or *good boy!*—expressions that are rife in interactions with children in middle-class American families—are not generally directed to children in Western Samoa.

In Western Samoan communities, those monitoring a task may engage in a ritualized exchange of

linguistic assessments of the action or activity that acknowledges the collaborative nature of that behavior. One person marks completion of the task with an assessment such as *mâlô!*, meaning *Well done!*, and the addressee immediately responds back, *mâlô fo'i!*, meaning *Well done also!* The praise is thus reciprocal and distributed rather than directed to any single participant. This type of exchange is typical of adult-adult interaction but less so of child-child or adult-child interaction.

CONTEXTS OF SYNCRETIC LITERACY

An important requirement of any ethnographically based study of language use is the need to have an understanding of the range of events within which a particular type of phenomenon occurs (Hymes, 1962). This applies to biculturalism and bilingualism as well (Hill & Hill, 1986). Although we will not be able to elaborate on all of the relevant contexts in which syncretic literacy takes place, we want to mention briefly some of the contexts that we have been analyzing: (a) church-based literacy instruction of Samoan in a village in Western Samoa (cf. Duranti & Ochs, 1986); (b) church-based literacy instruction of Samoan in Southern California; and (c) home literacy instruction of English in Samoan American families in Southern California.

In our discussion of syncretic literacy, we concentrate on the last setting, while keeping in mind the relevance of the others. A comparison of the three settings will be provided in future publications.

TRANSCRIPTION OF INTERACTION

In our transcripts, we follow a modified version of the conventions introduced by Gail Jefferson for conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). A detailed description of our conventions is found in the Appendix.

Here, as elsewhere in our publications on Samoan language and culture, we have chosen not to modify speakers' colloquial expressions, and thus we have not hidden any use of what Samoans call "bad speech" *(tautala leaŋa)*— a particular register that is marked by the pronunciation of two alveolar sounds, represented in traditional Samoan orthography as *t* and *n*, as the velar sounds /k/ and /ŋ/, respectively (Duranti & Ochs, 1986; Shore, 1982).[2] Whereas bad speech pronunciation is itself common in formal and ceremonial events in Samoa (Duranti, 1981, 1994), and for this reason alone cannot simply be labeled casual or informal, the combination of this pronunciation with the colloquialisms and morphosyntactic reductions characteristic of many household interactions gives it a rather private connotation that many Samoans do not like to see displayed publicly, especially in written form. Although recognizing the complexity of the issues involved in this as in other debates over representation of ethnic identity through language use (see Morgan, 1994, for a discussion of these issues in the study of African-American English), we feel that the particular register used by the participants is such an important part of the ongoing interaction that it cannot be hidden or modified without altering the nature of the phenomena being studied. Furthermore, in our case, the range of registers spoken in the home (which includes several varieties of English and Samoan) is part of the linguistic and social reality in which Samoan American children are raised. A study of the different cultural frames they are part of cannot but include the range of linguistic resources they are exposed to and are expected to understand.

All of the names of the participants in the interactions discussed here have been changed to protect their identity as much as possible.

SYNCRETIC LITERACY INSTRUCTION AMONG SAMOAN AMERICANS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

In our view, syncretism is a property that can be found in a number of contexts, including the display

and use of material resources, the spatial arrangement of human bodies and tools, the organization and content of co-occurrent activities, and the linguistic means through which specific acts are accomplished. In the following three sections, we will be looking at syncretism in (a) the environment, (b) the activities, and (c) the speech acts.

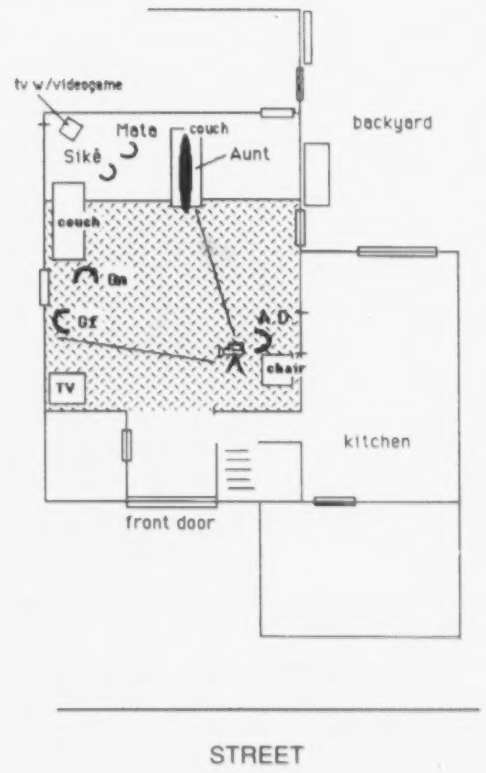
Syncretism in the Environment: Material Resources and Spatial Organization

Upon entering a Samoan American household in a Southern California suburb, one is struck by the multiculturalism of the physical surrounding as achieved through a syncretism of elements of material culture from two traditions, as well as by the spatial organization of such elements, including the occupation of the space by the participants' bodies. Our earlier work on the cultural organization of space in a traditional village in Western Samoa (Duranti, 1981, 1992, 1994; Ochs, 1988) can guide our perception and interpretation of the organization of space in the houses occupied by Samoan American families in Southern California.

On May 27, 1993, one of the researchers (A. Duranti) went for the first time to visit 6-year-old Sikê's family. The shoes and sandals left in front of the entrance were the first of a long series of reminders that the external shape of the building, a two-story house with a small front yard and a garage on the side, was perhaps the only feature in common with the other homes on the block.

The researcher found several members of the family in the living room area, including Sikê, his 12-year-old female cousin Mata, his grandparents, and his aunt (his grandparents' unmarried daughter). He was immediately offered some food and encouraged to sit down and eat it. Before sitting down, however, he set up the tape recorder on the floor and the video camera on a tripod. Figure 1 provides a map of where everyone is located at the moment when Duranti sits down to eat.

Figure 1. Map of section of Sikê's house with participants' locations at the beginning of first visit



Key: semicircle (∩) indicates sitting position (bird's eye view) of participants. Gm = grandmother, Gf = grandfather, A.D. = researcher ▨ = mats, ⬬ = person reclining.

The grandfather is sitting on the floor to the left; the grandmother is sitting on the floor farther away from the camera. Sikê and Mata are sitting facing the opposite corner, playing a video game; Sikê's aunt (who prepared and delivered the plate with food for the researcher) is lying on a couch watching the children play while also listening to and occasionally participating in the conversation among the adults in the room; the researcher (A.D.) is facing the grandfather and the grandmother. Several aspects of this setting are worth reflecting on, especially from the point of view of the syncretism of material resources and the distribution of activities and roles.

Despite the presence of two TV screens, the telephone in the center of the room (next to the

grandmother), the furniture, the central chandelier, and the thick walls, the scene here, in several respects, resembles what one might see in a very different type of house in a Samoan village. In particular, the seating arrangement closely resembles the type of spatial organization that we have documented in Western Samoa. If we take as a point of view the entrance to the house and the road, participants appear seated according to traditional categorical distinctions, with the guest and the grandparents located in the front part of the room and the grandchildren and the unmarried daughter in the back region (an area that in Samoa would be considered an extension of the basic floor plan of the house). In the front part of the room, a further distinction can also be drawn between the guest and the grandfather (who is also a chief), who are seated facing one another as appropriate to people of equal rank (Shore, 1982), in the more prestigious region, and the grandmother in the relatively lower position (farther back). Only the section of the room with the grandparents and the guest is covered by sitting mats,[3] whereas the back region with the children and the unmarried daughter shows the house floor rug.

Syncretism of Activities

A few minutes later, the activities, as well as the positions of the participants, have shifted considerably. Mata and the grandfather are the only two people left in the living room area. Mata is doing her homework, and the grandfather is watching television. The grandmother is at the sink in the kitchen; Sikê is sitting at the kitchen table reading his instruction sheets for his homework assignment; and the aunt is outside in the backyard. While the researcher with camera moves to the kitchen to follow Sikê's actions, Sikê gets up from the table and heads outside where his aunt is. He asks for help. The aunt first gives him directions on how to proceed; then, just as Sikê is heading back toward the kitchen table, she instructs him to get a box that is behind her, against the external wall of the living room. After an attempt to get the wrong box, Sikê identifies the box his aunt was indicating and drags it to her. The aunt adjusts the box on the side between her and Sikê and indicates to him that he can write on it. The box has been transformed into a desk.

As the camera moves closer and eventually outside of the house to follow Sikê's activity in the yard, we get a sense of the multiplicity of activities within the same physical space and the roles played in them by people and material resources. The visual record makes evident that homework is not the only activity occurring in the backyard. Another competing activity is emerging, one that has the box-desk as one of its essential elements. Next to Sikê and his aunt, on a couch, there are a number of traditional fine mats *(`ie toga)*. These are precious goods that are going to be sent back to Western Samoa to be exchanged in a ceremony, called *saofa`i,* during which the grandfather will be given a new and prestigious chiefly title. The box transformed by Sikê and his aunt into a desk is one of the boxes to be filled with fine mats. This makes the box a tool with multiple but by no means equal or neutral functions. Each use of the box indexes not only different types of activities within different value systems (e.g., doing homework vs. packing fine mats for a ceremony) but also different sets of culturally mediated expectations about children's and adults' roles and about the goals of socialization. These different expectations are exhibited in the following two segments. In the first, the aunt is instructing Sikê while the grandmother watches them, apprehensive and somewhat irritated.

Segment 1

1	Aunt:	okay- count this,
2		how many books?
3	Sikê:	(pointing with pen as he counts)) one. two. three. four.
		[
4	Aunt:	ˈ(three. four.)
5		Okay.
6	Sikê	((starts to write, turns to look at camera, goes back to write))
7		((changes position, leaning harder on box with his right arm))
8	Gm:	((raises eyebrows exhibiting disapproval))[4]
9		(2.0)
10	Gm:	*e:! leaŋa le ki(ŋ)ipusa!*
		hey! the empty box (gets) ruined!
11	Sikê:	((still writing))

In line 10, the grandmother expresses her concern about the box with a warning in fast speech: *e:! leaŋa le ki(ŋ)ipusa!* (literally, "the empty box *(atinipusa)* is bad *(leaŋa)*." Sikê, however, continues to write on the box. A few minutes later, the grandmother's fears come closer to reality as Sikê leans over and pushes hard enough with his elbow to cause a dent. She upgrades her warning (line 28), and this time her words are briefly echoed by her daughter (Sikê's aunt) (line 29).

Segment 2

27	Sikê:	((kneels down and leans on the box and makes a dent))
28	Gm:	*le kiŋipusa ɾ̃ leaŋa!*
		the box's gonna get ruined!
29	Aunt:	*ˋaua le soˋoga-*
		don't over- (i.e., don't press too hard)
30	Sikê:	(I write "Tom?")
31	Aunt:	yeah, write your ˈ(name). write your middle name,
32	Gm:	*ˈaˋe!*
		oh! ((disapproving))
		[
33	Aunt:	((pointing to a point on page))
		kuˋu lemū i ō
		put (it) slowly there

Several aspects of these two interactions are worth examining from the point of view of the syncretic nature of the literacy activity we find in it. First, we will focus on the different ways in which the aunt and the grandmother interact with the child. Whereas the aunt accommodates to the child by attending to the task that he is proposing (doing homework) and letting him use the box that was needed for another activity (packing fine mats), the grandmother is much less accommodating and more concerned that the child not jeopardize the adults' forthcoming activity (packing) by ruining the empty box on which he is writing. The aunt and the grandmother are thus following two different models: The grandmother is situation oriented (or accommodate child to situation), and the aunt is more child oriented (accommodate situation to child). The point here is not that the grandmother is insensitive to the child's needs but that she is more concerned with the child learning how to accomplish his goals without interfering with those of adult family members. At the same time, the aunt is not just assuming a western role of accommodating caregiver. She is also acting within the logic of traditional Samoan child care by assuming the lower ranking role of active caregiver, hence allowing the grandmother (the higher ranking caregiver) not to be directly engaged in the task at hand.

Syncretism of Acts Within a Single Activity

In the previous section, we have seen how two different caregivers, Sikê's grandmother and aunt, attending to two different activities in contact with one another, use two different socialization strategies toward Sikê to control his behavior as he does his homework. In segments 1 and 2, the codes the caregivers speak match such diverse strategies, with English being used by the aunt to help Sikê in his homework (adapt situation to child) and Samoan being used to remind him of his need to adapt to the situation.

In this section, we show that the same caregiver may produce a syncretic blend of teaching strategies within the same activity. Sometimes the blending takes place within the same code (English), other times in two separate codes (English and Samoan). In line 2 of segment 1, for instance, the aunt asks a test question ("how many books?"), a strategy typical of American teachers but not of Samoan caregivers in traditional communities. At other points (in line 1 in segment 1 and lines 13, 14, and 24 in segment 3), she uses explicit action directives to Sikê, thereby following patterns characteristic of Samoan caregivers in traditional households.

Segment 3

12	Aunt:	okay there it goes. okay
13		((pulls sheet away from Sikê)) this one right here
14		count how many balls
15	Sikê:	((pointing with pen as he counts)) one, (1.0) two,
16		(1.0) three, (1.0) four, (1.0) five, (1.0) six.
		[
17	Gm:	((turns away — moves metal frame on window))
18	Sikê:	((writes answer on paper))
19	Sikê:	(mh:)
20		((stands up))
21	Aunt:	you see? ((starts to reach for paper))
22		that's how you do your homework.
23		((pulls sheet away from Sikê and replaces it on box))
24		okay. write your last name

Finally, in line 51 of Segment 4 (which takes off from where Segment 2 ended), we find the Samoan expression *ŋa* (abbreviated from of *fa'apeŋâ*, meaning *like that)*, which we earlier described as a typical recognition of the fact that a task has been completed. This segment also shows more clearly the traditional Samoan pattern of instruction and direct error correction. The aunt guides Sikê step by step, providing instructions and close monitoring of his actions.

Segment 4

35	Aunt:	okay. write your middle name, (2.0) write it small!
36		(4.0)
37		°(write) (1.0) °(small)
38	Sikê:	((continues to write while Aunt holds hand next to his))
39		((leans back))
40	Aunt:	°(oka-) your last name,
41		write above this one. write here.[6]
		[
42	Sikê:	(?)
43		((continues to write))
44	Aunt:	(don't put-) no=no=no=no
45		(1.0)
46		over here (1.0) start °(it) here
		[
47		((pointing to place on the sheet))
48	Sikê:	((writes))
49	Aunt:	and write *t* over here
50	Sikê:	((writes))
51	Aunt:	°(*ŋâ*.)
		Like that.

The homework activity is thus syncretic in that certain acts that comprise it orient toward western modes of instruction, whereas other acts orient toward traditional modes of instruction.

Syncretism Within a Single Act

Syncretism may also characterize the construction of a single act within a literacy activity such as homework. Particularly striking is the hybrid construction (Bakhtin, 1981), *there it goes*, in line 12, which is a blending of the English *there you go*, said

to a child who has just managed to do what was asked, and the Samoan *fa`apeŋâ* (or simply *ŋâ*), meaning *like that*. The sense of recognition found in the English *there you go*, which, after all, acknowledges the addressee *(you)* as the successful agent of an action, is downgraded by the replacement of *you* with *it*, which, once again, focuses on the activity rather than on the person engaged in it.

Reallocating and Relocating the Task

As we discussed earlier, in a Samoan village, the organization of caregiving is highly stratified and distributed: Given two potential caregivers, the more senior or higher ranking one will expect the younger and lower ranking one to be the active caregiver. In the interaction discussed so far, we have seen this principle at work in that, when both Sikê's aunt and grandmother are present, it is the aunt (younger) who attends to the child's needs (to finish his homework). As shown in the next segment, the hierarchical and distributed model continues to apply when Sikê's cousin, Mata, comes to the scene.

A few minutes after the interaction just discussed (Segments 1-4), Sikê comes back with his second assignment sheet, which is about English prepositions. In the meantime, the grandmother has taken control of the box and has started to fold and carefully place the fine mats in it. While Sikê is showing the homework sheet to his aunt, his cousin, Mata (labeled as "older sib" in the photo below), comes by and starts to follow the interaction. This is the point at which Segment 5 takes off.

Segment 5

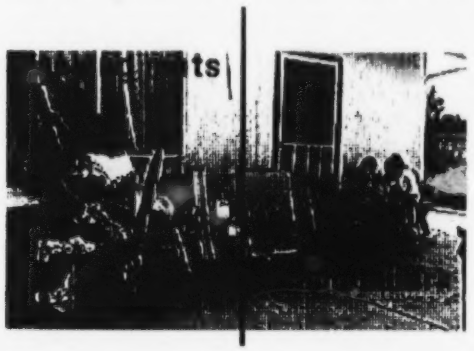
1	Sikê:	((is holding a sheet of paper that he shows to aunt))
2		((Mata comes outside and stands in doorway))
3	Aunt:	((reaches for paper))
4		okay this one
		[
5		((grabs paper with right hand, brings it closer to look at it))
6	Mata:	((moves over to look at paper))
7	Aunt:	oh no this one you have to:-
8		((puts paper back on flap of box in front of Sikê))
9		you have to read.
10	Mata:	((moves behind Sikê to be able to read))
11	Sikê:	well you have-
12		((points to paper)) you go:(t) uhmm underline it.

When Sikê seems to have a hard time explaining the assignment to his aunt, his cousin, Mata, becomes more involved in the activity. In line 16, which follows, she reads the relevant passage from the assignment sheet; in line 20, she indicates where to find the relevant information (the picture of the cave), and in line 22, she proposes the solution to the problem.

13	Aunt:	underline d' what?
14	Sikê:	bus or the-
15		((points to three different places on the sheet))
16	Mata:	((leans down and over to read))
17		((reading)) "the bus will go in"
		[
18	Aunt:	((grabs paper and tilts it to have a better view))
19	Sikê:	tha:- bus::-
20	Mata:	((pointing)) right here.
21		(1.0)
22	Mata:	the bus is going in the cave.

At this point, the aunt instructs Mata and Sikê to get another box, implicitly suggesting that they can go and work on it, creating a second desk, but the grandmother this time explicitly forbids the use of a new box by suggesting that they use something different. The solution is a nearby bench, where Mata and Sikê are eventually sent by the aunt to complete the homework assignment (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The two activities of packing mats and doing homework become separate.



With this new spatial configuration in place, the two activities that earlier coexisted in one location, sharing one tool (the box), are now divided. This is a very traditional solution whereby the adults are free to continue with their work (in this case, folding mats and placing them in boxes) while the older children in the household take care of the younger ones. The syncretism is this time realized through the blending of a western task (English homework) with a form of social organization that is part of the traditional Samoan learning environment (hierarchical division of labor in caregiving).

CONCLUSIONS

Our work in a Samoan American community in Southern California has been used here to make two general points about the relationship between multilingualism and multiculturalism and, thus, to rectify what in our view are common misconceptions about immigrant communities in the United States and elsewhere. By concentrating on a homework task carried out in one of the families in our study, we have shown that the following is true in a multilingual, multicultural family setting:

(a) Language (in the sense of the specific code used at any particular time in an interaction) is not always a good predictor of the cultural orientation or interpretive frame that is being activated by the participants. Thus, in a Samoan American family, English may be used fluently but in ways that are consistent with the socialization practices typical of traditional learning environments in the home country.

(b) Members of multicultural communities can be in more than one culture at a time. This becomes apparent in the homework sequence analyzed here, as the same space and material resources are being used for two very different tasks by different participants. Whereas the grandmother sees the space in the backyard and the boxes placed in that space as needed for the accomplishment of a task oriented toward a rather traditional aspect of Samoan culture (the preparation and exchange of ceremonial objects), her grandchild sees it as a new location in which to accomplish his math and English homework assignments. The child's aunt (and grandmother's daughter) accommodates to both cultural orientations by mediating between them. She first transforms a material object (a box) designed for one task into a tool (a desk) for the other, then when a younger potential caregiver arrives on the scene, redirects the child to a different location so that she can accommodate to her mother and the accomplishment of the traditional task.

An implication stemming from the concept of syncretism employed here is that becoming an English speaker does not necessarily entail adopting strategies characteristic of other groups who use English. Although many Samoan American family members use the dominant language of the United States, they may do so primarily at the level of the communicative code rather than at the level of communicative conduct.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

Aunt:	Speakers' names or kinship relation to the target child are separated from their utterances by colons, followed by a few blank spaces.
(1.0)	Numbers between parentheses indicate length of pauses in seconds and tenths of seconds.
[	A square bracket between turns indicates the point at which there is simultaneity of actions, either in the form of overlapping speech or concurrent actions (e.g., speech by one person and gesture by another).
you have to <u>rea</u>d	Underlining is used for emphasis, often accompanied by higher volume.
(mh)	Material between single parentheses indicates uncertainty of transcription.
°(oka-)	Material between parentheses preceded by a degree symbol was uttered in low volume or whisper.
((points))	Material between double parentheses provides information about bodily movements.
e leaŋa	Samoan utterances and expressions are in italics and reproduce the actual pronunciation. The letter *g* used in Samoan orthography for a velar nasal (*ng* in other languages) has been replaced by the phonetic symbol *ŋ*.
(? ?)	Blank spaces inside parentheses with occasional question marks indicate uncertain or unclear talk of approximately the length of the blank spaces between parentheses.
no=no=no	The equal signs indicate latching, that is, no interval between the beginning of one turn (in this case, a mono-syllabic expression, *no*) and the next.
or the-	A dash at the end of a word indicates an abrupt self-interruption, typically before a "restart."
tha:- bus::-	Colons indicate that the sound is lengthened, for emphasis or other reasons.

NOTES

[1] To those familiar with Samoan orthography, our transcription will appear, in some respects, unconventional. We follow the tradition in using the inverted apostrophe [`] to represent a glottal stop [ʔ], but we replace the macron found in traditional Samoan orthography with the circumflex accent (e.g., â, ê). See section on "Transcription of Interaction" (page 6) and footnote 2 for an explanation of our transcription of colloquial Samoan.

[2] To avoid ambiguity, we replaced the letter *g*, introduced by the missionaries to represent the velar nasal, with the phonetic symbol /*ŋ*/. (In other Polynesian languages, the same sound is represented by *ng*.) It should be pointed out that the sound /*ŋ*/ is also found in good speech, but in bad speech, /*ŋ*/ replaces all /n/ found in good speech. Thus, certain distinctions found in good speech (e.g., /*fana*/ gun, shoot vs. /*faŋa*/ bay) are neutralized in bad speech, where both *fana* and *faŋa* are pronounced *[faŋa]*.

[3] These are an imported brand of industrially produced mats that are not found in Western Samoa, where the sitting mats are hand woven, like all other mats, by the women of the household.

[4] Pronounced eyebrow movement is here interpreted by Samoans as a pre-disagreement. This movement must thus be distinguished from the eyebrow flash studied by Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1974), which, accompanied by a slight raising of the chin and (sometimes) by a smile, conveys agreement.

[5] This is a colloquial expression in which the preposition *i* before the predicate *(leaŋa)* is used to introduce a likely and unwanted event. In careful good speech, the word *kiŋipusa* would be pronounced *atiŋipusa* and in careful bad speech *akiŋipusa*.

[6] An alternative interpretation of this sequence is "right above this one. right here."

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THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR
RESEARCH ON
CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND
SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING
SOCIAL SCIENCES II
1156 HIGH STREET
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ, CA 95064
PHONE: (408) 459-3500
FAX: (408) 459-3502